Delaware Stars Validation Study Key Findings and Next Steps

Background

In 2013, the Delaware Office of Early Learning (OEL) engaged the RAND Corporation to conduct an independent validation study of Delaware Stars for Early Success, the state's quality rating and improvement system (QRIS) for early care and education (ECE) programs. The study was a required component of the federal Early Learning Challenge Grant awarded to the state.

The purpose of the RAND validation study was to support Delaware in its efforts to:

- Design and implement an effective, robust system for measuring and reporting on the quality of ECE programs
- Improve ECE program quality in ways that are beneficial for participating children and their families.

The study aimed to examine the extent to which Delaware Stars rating tiers reflect meaningful differences in ECE program quality and whether the QRIS is operating effectively in terms of technical assistance, financial supports, and other features.

The RAND validation study was based on multiple sources of information:

- Delaware Stars administrative data including program ratings and program receipt of technical assistance and financial supports
- Interviews with program directors and focus groups with parents of infants, toddlers, or preschool-age children
- Interviews with directors in approximately 180 licensed home- and center-based ECE programs both in Delaware Stars and not in Delaware Stars, and observation-based assessments of quality for the sampled programs
- Developmental assessments for about 1,200 children ages two to five enrolled in the sampled programs

These data sources were analyzed using qualitative and quantitative methods. During the study period, Delaware Stars implemented a number of enhancements to the rating system that were not yet fully phased in before the evaluation was completed.

Key Findings

Performance of Delaware Stars Ratings

- Independent measures of program quality generally increased as Delaware Stars levels rose, but the differences in program quality were not very large in moving up the rating scale.
- Children's learning across multiple developmental domains was not consistently higher in more highly rated programs. One exception was that children in Star 5 center-based programs modestly outperformed children in Starting with Stars and Star 2 programs on executive function skills, an important predictor of academic success.
- Two quality domains of Delaware Stars—Management and Administration and Qualifications and Professional Development—were predictive of modest differences in some assessments of children's early academic and cognitive skills.
- Other states conducting validation studies are reporting similar findings for their relatively new QRIS.

Performance of Other Aspects of Delaware Stars System

- Programs face challenges in advancing through the rating tiers, but they are motivated to improve quality.
- Directors cite financial incentives – particularly tiered reimbursement – as a valuable catalyst for improving quality.
- Directors highly value specialized coaching and training designed to improve quality in targeted areas, although directors desire more consistent, and more frequent, coaching and mentoring for their programs.
- Directors note that Delaware Stars supports professionalization of the early learning workforce by requiring more rigorous qualifications and improving instructional practices.
- Program directors report low parental awareness of Delaware Stars, which limits parents' ability to choose quality options.
- The state lacks sufficient and effective data systems to provide policymakers with accurate data and to measure the results of investments in Delaware Stars.

RAND Recommendations and Future Direction for Delaware Stars

RAND Recommendations to the Office of Early Learning

- Review other states' QRIS validation studies to inform adjustments to Delaware Stars rating system and other QRIS procedures.
- Further improve the technical assistance and financial incentives within Delaware Stars to better support program quality improvement.
- Reduce the number of standards measured by Delaware Stars to focus on those that are most closely connected with child outcomes or other goals of the QRIS.
- Reduce the number of data elements collected for the Delaware Stars database and devote the savings to more frequent and accurate collection of the core data elements.
- Strengthen the marketing of Delaware Stars to families seeking quality early learning options for their children.
- Build longitudinal data systems to link children's early learning experiences with their K-12 school data.

Future Direction for Delaware Stars

Just a decade ago, 70% of early education experiences in Delaware were deemed mediocre or detrimental to children's health[1]. Today, Delaware is investing in higher quality early learning experiences for young children by measuring and improving quality. Findings and recommendations from the RAND study will be used to strengthen Delaware Stars as the state continues to invest in early childhood and quality improvement. In particular, the Office of Early Learning will focus on:

- Increasing preparation and continuing education requirements for early learning teachers and administrators.
- Aligning and strengthening licensing practices to Delaware Stars.
- Seeking national and state funding to build a longitudinal P–12 data system in coordination with state agencies.